

\$5.3 million donated by volunteers to local bushland

Sydney residents donated \$5.3 million worth of their time last year to help look after local bushland.

A recent survey conducted by the Sydney Metropolitan Catchment Management Authority (SMCMA) found over 21,000 people were involved in environmental volunteering activities during 2007, contributing 178,000 hours of work in bushcare groups and other on-ground activities. This is up 7% on figures collected in 2005.

8,800 volunteers throughout Sydney met in groups on a regular basis, usually monthly, to carry out bush regeneration activities. Another 12,500 participated in "one-off" activities such as tree planting. This figure includes 3,000 corporate volunteers who contributed 15,500 hours towards on-ground works.

"Volunteers are often inspired by a personal experience to contribute something positive towards the natural environment," commented SMCMA Chair Bob Junor.

"In 1994 bushfires burnt over two thirds of the Lane Cove National Park and destroyed 13 homes. At a public meeting held to gather support for a bushcare program to help the park vegetation regenerate, 150 neighbours, visitors and conservationists turned up. Many are still working today." One of these is Dave Meggitt, who started as a monthly volunteer, and went on to become a professional regenerator and trainer, while still working as a volunteer (see over).

There is no age limit to environmental volunteering, though it is difficult to get insurance if you are under 16 or over 80 years of age. Not that this stops people. Rymill Abell is now 82, and still going strong (see over), while Yat needed a letter of permission from her mother to join because she was only 15 years old (see over). Language is not a barrier, and for many new Australians it is a way to get to know and understand their adopted home (see Simone Curry over).

Almost all the work is carried out on community land that is managed by local councils who struggle to control the weeds on limited budgets. Bushcare volunteers are becoming an increasingly important resource in looking after public bushland.

The SMCMA is one of 13 state government bodies that together are responsible for coordinating the management of NSW natural resources – the water, soil, land and coast, and their flora and fauna. The SMCMA works with 39 local councils, community groups, education bodies, peak environment groups and other government agencies.

NSW Environment Minister Verity Firth congratulated the Sydney CMA for creating avenues for city-siders to get involved in environmental work.

"Involving local communities in the effort to improve the environment is exactly what CMAs are all about. Sydney CMA has been particularly proactive in this regard," Ms Firth said.

"CMAs across NSW play a critical role in managing our precious natural resources – our waterways, soils and bushlands.

"The more people we can involve, the better the outcomes for our local environment will be."

NSW Minister for Volunteering Linda Burney said environmental volunteers not only made an enormous difference to the health of our ecosystems, they contributed significantly to the wellbeing of their communities.

"We know from research that communities with high levels of volunteering and community participation are more cohesive and their citizens happier and healthier," said Ms Burney.

"Bushcare groups are a fantastic example of how volunteers strengthen communities. When they actively recruit people of all backgrounds to work together to restore their local habitat, they create a real spirit of cooperation and mutual support."

Photo and interview opportunity: **Saturday 24 May at 10:45am**

Linda Burney, NSW Minister for Volunteering, will officially launch the **'Environmental Volunteering in the Sydney Region 2007' brochure** at the 2008 SMCMA Community Forum on Environmental Partnerships

Venue: **Novotel Hotel, Sydney Olympic Park, Homebush.**

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VOLUNTEERS WORKING TO IMPROVE SYDNEY'S BUSHLANDS

Dave Meggitt 9403 1171

When a bushcare group started working in the park near his home in 1995, Dave got curious and went over to say hello. He joined the group, which met once a month on the weekend. He was quickly "hooked", and became the group co-ordinator. Five years later he retired from his work in graphic arts software, completed a certificate course at Ryde TAFE and started a new working life as a bush regenerator. He works as a contract professional and also trains volunteers for Kuring-gai Council. Dave continues to work as a volunteer because he enjoys meeting with like minded people once a month and doing something valuable to the community.

Rymill Abell 9416 5936

When CSIRO moved to a new campus backing on to bushland in 1977 there was no money for landscaping so a few employees cleared some weeds and planted natives in their lunch time. They made a few poor choices and Rymill, who was interested in plants and enjoyed germinating seed he collected on his travels, admits to planting a few Australian species that are now recognized as weeds. In 1983 Rymill was invited to afternoon tea with a group of professional bush regenerators working as volunteers. He started working as a volunteer soon after. Later when he retired, he was offered a casual job with Bradley and May. He worked as a professional regenerator until he turned 80 last year. Rymill still works as a volunteer on several sites, and is still part of the afternoon tea group. He gets great personal satisfaction from his volunteer work.

Yat Shum 0433 073 782

Yat joined her local bushcare group to meet the Community Service requirement of the Queens Guide Challenge. She was required to complete 30 hours service over 3 months, and chose Bushcare because it was nearby, next door in fact, and "eccentric". During her time she started to recognize the differences between native and weed plants, and discovered an interest in the bush. She is staying on because it's fun, enjoyable and helps the environment.

Simone Curry 9564 1244

Volunteer Engagement Officer – Conservation Volunteers Australia.

The CVA –Sydney office attracts a wide range of volunteers.

Regular volunteers

Meet weekly. Aged between 35-60 years of age, the majority are men, a mix of retirees and long term unemployed, and some with mental health issues.

One off or irregular volunteers

Generally university students or young volunteers aged between 16-30 years, interested in the environment or volunteering as way to increase their job opportunities.

International Volunteers

The majority of these are students from Korea and Japan living in Sydney for a short period of time to study English. Many are interested in practicing their English, and gaining recognition for their volunteering and seeing new places.

Photo opportunities: contact Simone to find out where a group is working any day.